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Vincent de Paul and Hospitality

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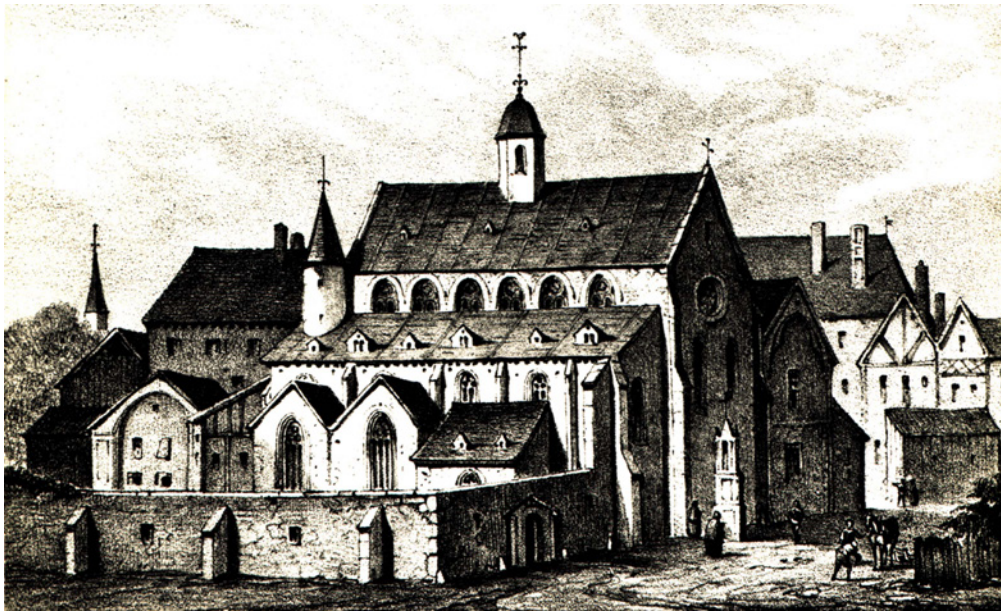
Vincent de Paul and Hospitality

JOHN E. RYBOLT, C.M., PH.D.



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Engraving of the chapel exterior of Saint-Lazare, Paris.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online

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Vincent de Paul bequeathed to his two communities, the Congregation of the Mission (the Vincentians) and the Daughters of Charity, a tradition of hospitality. This should not be a surprise, given his attention to individuals, particularly the poor. His welcoming spirit made the Paris mother house of the Congregation, called Saint-Lazare, a center where guests of all sorts were welcomed for shorter or longer periods. This study will outline certain aspects of this quality, beginning with Saint-Lazare and then moving out to other foundations.

Welcoming the poor

Paris in the founder's period—he died in 1660—was itself a place of refuge for victims of civil wars. The city, of course, also attracted others in search of a better life. Vincent de Paul himself is an example: he left his home diocese, Dax, and moved to the capital around 1607, where he began to make contacts among the ecclesiastical and even social elite. Being surrounded with refugees, the poor, and the marginalized, his attention gradually shifted away from his personal advancement toward service given to his needy sisters and brothers.

When he received the enormous Parisian property of Saint-Lazare in 1632, he discovered that he had the largest ecclesiastical property in the city (second only, probably, to Saint-Germain-des-Prés). Saint-Lazare had its own buildings and gardens, a working farm, windmills to grind grain, and a quarry for building stone. He also inherited whole streets and their houses leased to tenants. Besides these properties in Paris, he likewise received farm properties. Vincent regarded all of this as part of the patrimony of the poor, for which he and his congregation were responsible. As a result, the poor could come to Saint-Lazare, often styled the Headquarters of Charity.

Saint-Lazare attracted numerous individuals living in poverty, especially those who needed food. The institution gradually extended its reach and organized its approach—Vincent was a master at organizing charity—so that his confreres were daily serving meals

to hundreds. One of the ways he nourished the hungry poor was to assemble them for catechism lessons before mealtime, thus ministering to their souls as well as their bodies. This practice reflected his style of giving missions, when he always had lessons on the faith for groups of children in the morning and adults in the evening. He wanted them to know and practice their faith. In both cases (the rural missions and Saint-Lazare), he assigned his priests and even the students and novices preparing for priesthood to prepare the catechism lessons and manage the distribution of food. On this last point, the rules for the novices show Vincent's care for details:

He [the novice] will finish at 12:15 when he hears the bell ringing for the Obedience [a house meeting], or for the second table on fast days, and he will then have someone say the blessing and the Our Father before the meal [*potage*] is distributed to anyone. He will recommend that they always say this before their meal, as well as thanksgiving afterward.¹

The custom grew of inviting one or two poor men to join the community for a meal, presumably their main daily meal. In this, Vincent was following the injunction of Jesus in Luke 14:13 to invite the poor to attend a festive meal. The founder's successors continued the practice at Saint-Lazare, but it was often interrupted and eventually became symbolic since the same poor man was regularly invited. Nonetheless, Vincent's very presence was a lesson to the other diners.

For those who came to the house to ask for financial help, the brother at the main door had explicit policies to follow:

When there are some poor persons at the door, he will listen to them and speak to them kindly and humbly; and if the superior has instructed him to give them something as an alms, he will do so promptly and cordially, without ever making them wait, unless it is for the meal that is given them at a certain hour.²

The homebound

While Vincent was pastor in 1617 at Châtillon-lès-Dombes, a small town north of Lyons, his heart was awakened to the condition of the poor in his parish. One August Sunday, a woman in the parish asked him to recommend to the parishioners the case of a sick man (or perhaps his entire family). He had no one to help him and was hungry. The parishioners followed their pastor's exhortation so faithfully that he commented that it was like a procession of people bringing food and supplies. The eventual waste of the food troubled him, however, since the poor man would be unable to keep the food fresh. Vincent's organizational sense came into play and in the next few months—he left Châtillon

¹ "Règles du Séminaire Interne, Avis pour celui qui va faire le Catéchisme," art. 8, in Archives de la Congrégation de la Mission, Paris (ACMP).

² "Règles du frère portier," undated ms., but before 1789, art. 10, in ACMP.

in December—he drew up rules for a group of charitable persons in the parish that would allow them to better reach out to their needy fellow parishioners. What is particularly charming in these rules for what he called the Confraternity of Charity is his attention given to the care of the sick poor.

When the person whose turn it is has received from the Treasurer whatever is needed on her day for the food of the poor persons, she will prepare the dinner and take it to the patients, greeting them cheerfully and kindly. She will set up the tray on the bed, place on it a napkin [or “white cloth”] a cup, a spoon, and some bread, wash the patient’s hands, and then say grace.... She will do all this as lovingly as if she were serving her own son—or rather God, who considers as done to Himself the good she does for persons who are poor.³

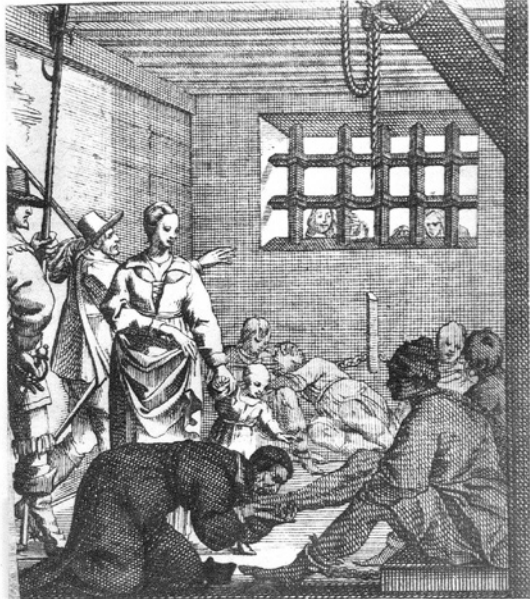
This paragraph illustrates how Vincent, drawing his inspiration from the Bible, developed his hospitable care for the needy.

The prisoners

The penal system in France in the seventeenth century utilized monasteries and convents for certain kinds of confinement. Their purpose is evident in the word penitentiary, a place where prisoners would forcibly do penance for their sins. Reformatory is another such term, although not much in use today. In the seventeenth century, large religious institutions were paid to care for persons in need of reform, such as priests in difficulty, young men from upper-class families who had fallen away from the obligations of their station, and others whose confinement suited the king. Regrettably, among the inmates were also patients with mental and emotional problems. It was hoped that for all of them, a regular round of whippings (such as students commonly received in schools), bad food, numerous religious exercises, and conversations with their keepers would result in reform.

Vincent inherited this system when he received Saint-Lazare, and for this reason he had to develop practices to conform to his view of ministry. The same rules for the novices cited above also have a section entitled “Advice for those who go to visit the afflicted.” Vincent again based his approach on the Gospels, in this case Matthew 25:36: “I was in prison and you came to visit me.” The novices were instructed to spend half-an-hour visiting the prisoners on Tuesdays and Thursdays, speaking to each one as the occasion demanded. Their conversations were supposed to be on spiritual topics, or even on the catechism for those who were ignorant of the truths of faith. In addition, “it is also good to sometimes have them hope that their captivity... will not last long, but if God permits it, it will be good to conform themselves to his holy will.” On a less theological level, he wrote: “If they discuss with us their individual cases or the reason for their detention, it will be

³ Document 126, “Charity of Women (Châtillon-lès-Dombes),” in *Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. and trans. by Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., et al, 1-14 (New York: New City Press, 1985-2014), 13b:12-13. Hereafter CCD.



Les uns qui sont destinés pour servir aux galères Reçoivent son aumône, et ce vertueux pere
Et qui pour leur forfait s'est de chajou liee Leur ouylyst les mains leur bajcoule les pied.

SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL
VISITANT LES GALÉRIENS DE LA TOURNELLE.
Gravure du temps.

Vincent de Paul visits the galley prisoners at La Tournelle.

One of the earliest engravings of Vincent.

Reproduced in Henri Lavedan, *The Heroic Life of Saint Vincent de Paul* (1929).

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online

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good to listen to them charitably, to have compassion for them, and to console them, but without ever telling them anything that their relatives are saying about them.”⁴

Welcoming guests

Since our houses are almost always open to externs who come there either to make a retreat or as residents, the great cleanliness with which they will be served in the dining room can contribute greatly to their edification. Consequently, the person responsible for this office should give himself completely to God to fulfill his office with the greatest exactitude.

This article of the rule for the person in charge of the dining room is one of several that speak of the regular practice of welcoming guests and attentively treating them with respect. The basis of this respect, as has been seen above, is rooted in the Sacred Scriptures, especially by seeing the Lord Jesus in the person of the one being welcomed. One of the many rules mentioning this deals with a mundane task such as changing the sheets and blankets for guests and making up their rooms:

He will go to the laundry to ask for [sheets and blankets] as soon as needed, and will put them in the empty room, and, as soon as the bell for the particular examination of conscience has sounded and these gentlemen have come downstairs, he will enter their rooms to make the bed, but not in a rush, as if it was done for Our Lord himself; he will keep the chamber pots clean and sweep the room if any straw [from the mattress] has fallen out.

⁴ “Règles du Séminaire Interne, Avis pour ceux qui vont visiter les affligés,” arts. 6, 13, in ACMP.

Troubled priests

Vincent's ministry extended not only to the poor but also to those who served the poor, particularly the clergy. For this reason, those confreres sent out to conduct parish missions in rural areas were also to offer their help to the local clergy through days of prayer or retreats. In his day, as well as afterwards, clergy sometimes found themselves in trouble. To care for them, bishops established what can easily be deemed "clerical prisons," devoted exclusively to the care and reformation of the inmates. In the history of the Congregation, various provinces staffed these institutions. Often, the problem priests were confined to a portion of a Vincentian house. They had their own director and daily schedule, concentrating on prayer and penance.

Although little is known about these institutions as a group, they served a purpose in the life of the Church, and the Vincentians were called to devote themselves to their troubled colleagues, much as Vincent himself did in his time.

Foreigners

From the earliest years of the Congregation, Vincent de Paul, responding to calls from the Church, assigned his men to non-French mission posts. He occasionally mentioned his willingness to go far afield in service of the Gospel, but he probably did not work out all the details and challenges that would face his confreres in the future.

Nonetheless, he knew that his men would have to study and master other languages, and he insisted on it. He made an amusing comment about one of the students sent to Turin to learn Italian: "I am greatly consoled that Brother Demortier has already made such progress in the language that he now knows how to say 'Signor, si.'" ⁵ Three months previously, Vincent had believed that his student would "soon learn the language." ⁶

Besides language, the founder also came to appreciate the need to understand and respect different cultures. Like educated persons of his time, he knew many details about Muslims and Islamic practice. This was particularly important for the men he sent to Algeria and Tunis to care for enslaved Christian hostages being held there for ransom. He instructed his confreres carefully to observe the laws and customs of the native peoples. The same was true for the men he sent on the ill-starred mission to Madagascar—ill-starred since the French colonists and entrepreneurs there were uninterested in religion, and the native Malagasy people had their own faith and culture. Still, the founder believed that God had called him and his Missioners to undertake the conversion of the island. The first work in the Malagasy language, apart from a manuscript bilingual dictionary, was a French-Malagasy catechism. ⁷ As this was standard mission practice, the Vincentians were no different than their colleagues elsewhere.

⁵ Letter 2290, "To Jean Martin, Superior, In Turin," 22 June 1657, CCD, 6:351.

⁶ Letter 2255, "To Jean Martin, Superior, In Turin," 28 April 1657, CCD, 6:308.

⁷ Ludvig Munthe, Elie Rajaonarison, and Désiré Ranaivosoa, *Le catéchisme malgache de 1657: essai de présentation du premier livre en langue malgache : approche théologique, historique, linguistique et conceptuelle* (Oslo: Egede Instituttet, 1987).



Vincent de Paul welcoming pilgrims to lodge.

Engraving by Abraham Bosse.

Printed in Arthur Loth, *Saint Vincent de Paul et sa Mission Sociale* (1880).

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online

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Returning confreres

Vincent's hospitality included a warm welcome to confreres returning from their missions. The work was difficult and tiring, and transportation was equally problematic. When some returned, they were so weak that they had to go directly to the infirmary to recover. Otherwise, Vincent was so delighted to have his brothers back home that he instructed the brothers to ring the bells and his confreres to come to the main door to welcome them back.⁸ Vincent described their practice:

When one of our confreres returns from the country, we each go in turn to welcome him with a cheerful expression, taking great care to bring him what he needs; and if his legs have to be bathed to refresh him, we do it.⁹

The welcome had a very human side as well, and sometimes featured something Vincent did not like:

Whenever someone comes back from the country, he's taken to the infirmary or to a bedroom, and dinner or supper is brought to him.... One man will say, "Drink to my health," and the other does it. Too much wine is brought in, and this can cause a great deal of harm. They chat and talk about silly things there. In a word, this is shameful.¹⁰

In the house

Hospitality can even be understood in extending to care for the confreres living in the house itself, any house, in fact, and not just Saint-Lazare. Vincent's sense of good order

⁸ Conference 97, "Welcoming Returning Missioners," 5 September 1642, *CCD*, 11:114.

⁹ Conference 17, "Cordial Respect," 1 January 1644, *CCD*, 9:127.

¹⁰ Conference 148, "Repetition of Prayer," 16 March 1656, *CCD*, 11:297.

found its fulfillment not in any need of his to be prissy or demanding, but in his need to provide the best for his men. He did not want them to be accommodated with the ultimate must-have items. Indeed, he himself lived a simple and austere life, as his own room made clear. He eschewed the use of bed curtains, for example, but eventually agreed that his confreres could install them because of his declining health. On display in the Vincentian Museum at the Paris mother house, it is evident they certainly would have kept him warm at night in the unheated house.

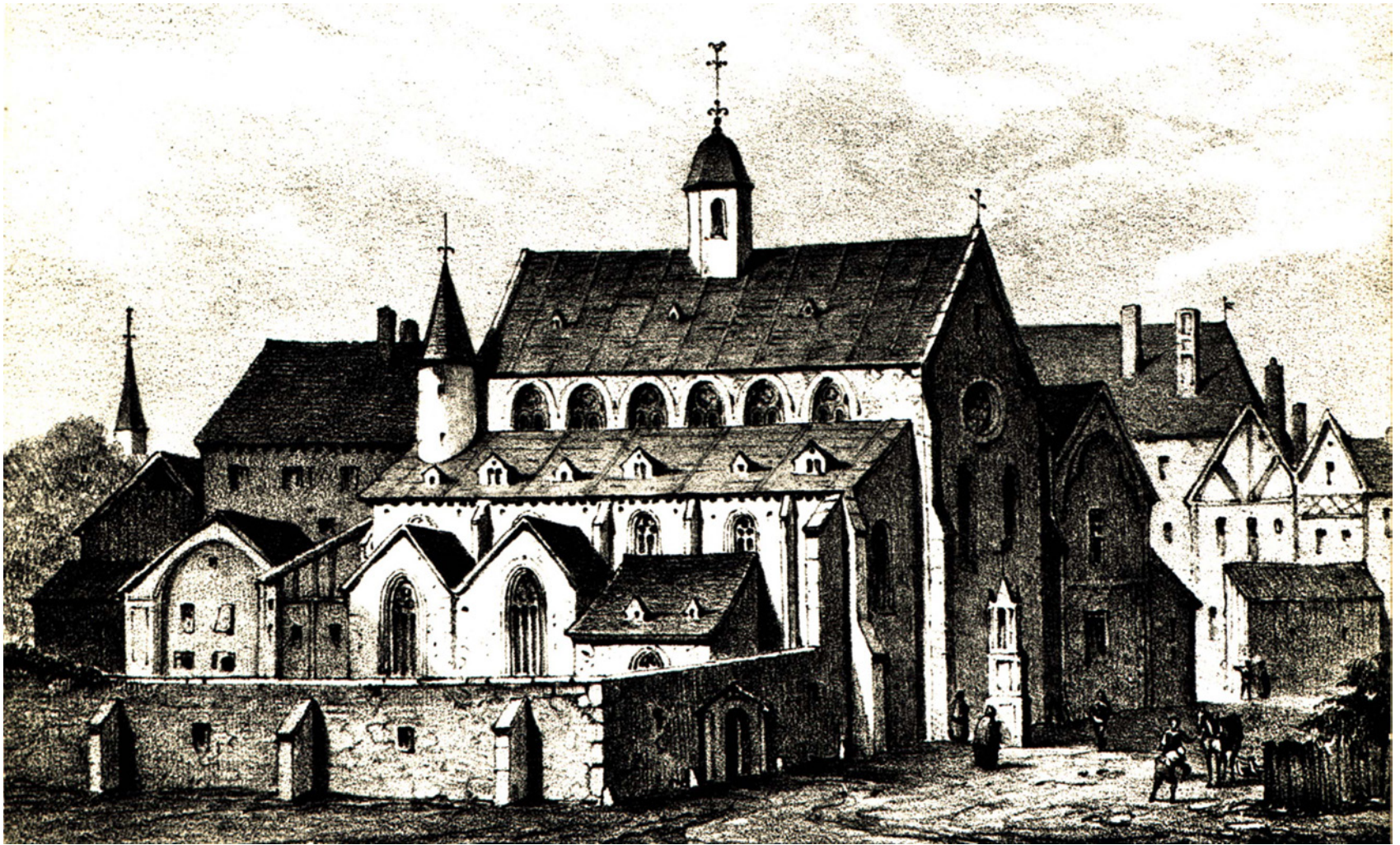
The sets of rules cited above, as well as numerous others, all prescribe attention to cleanliness in the house and in one's room. In so doing, Vincent inculcated a spirit of good order and respect for others, the heart of hospitality. Of course, best practices were sometimes not observed, but this was an abuse, not a normal standard. Some men were hoarders, and others were careless about themselves and their surroundings, for example.

Lessons learned

Examining the life of Vincent de Paul reveals both human and spiritual qualities. He was a good organizer and he had a welcoming spirit. People flocked to him, both women and men; they helped his work with their time, talents, and treasure, as we say. He must have been warm and charming for this to happen. Quite possibly his rural background and awareness of the human realities strengthened him for his ministry, reforming his abrupt and quick-tempered spirit until he, like Moses, became the "meekest man of his time."

On the spiritual side, he was able to link his human qualities with biblical teaching, especially from the New Testament. Adopting the theological and spiritual practices of others, such as John of God, the Portuguese founder of the Order of Hospitalers, Vincent saw in others, especially the sick and the poor, the person of Jesus Christ. One was expected to serve Jesus in the person of the poor, but not only them, since Vincent's rules demonstrate that he used this perspective as the key to hospitality for everyone, near and far, poor and rich, laity and clergy. This is the principal lesson to be gleaned from his ministry, something that everyone, Christian or not, could make his or her own. Openness to others, availability to guests, care for the weak, with a heart of mercy and forgiveness: such are the qualities of Vincentian hospitality.



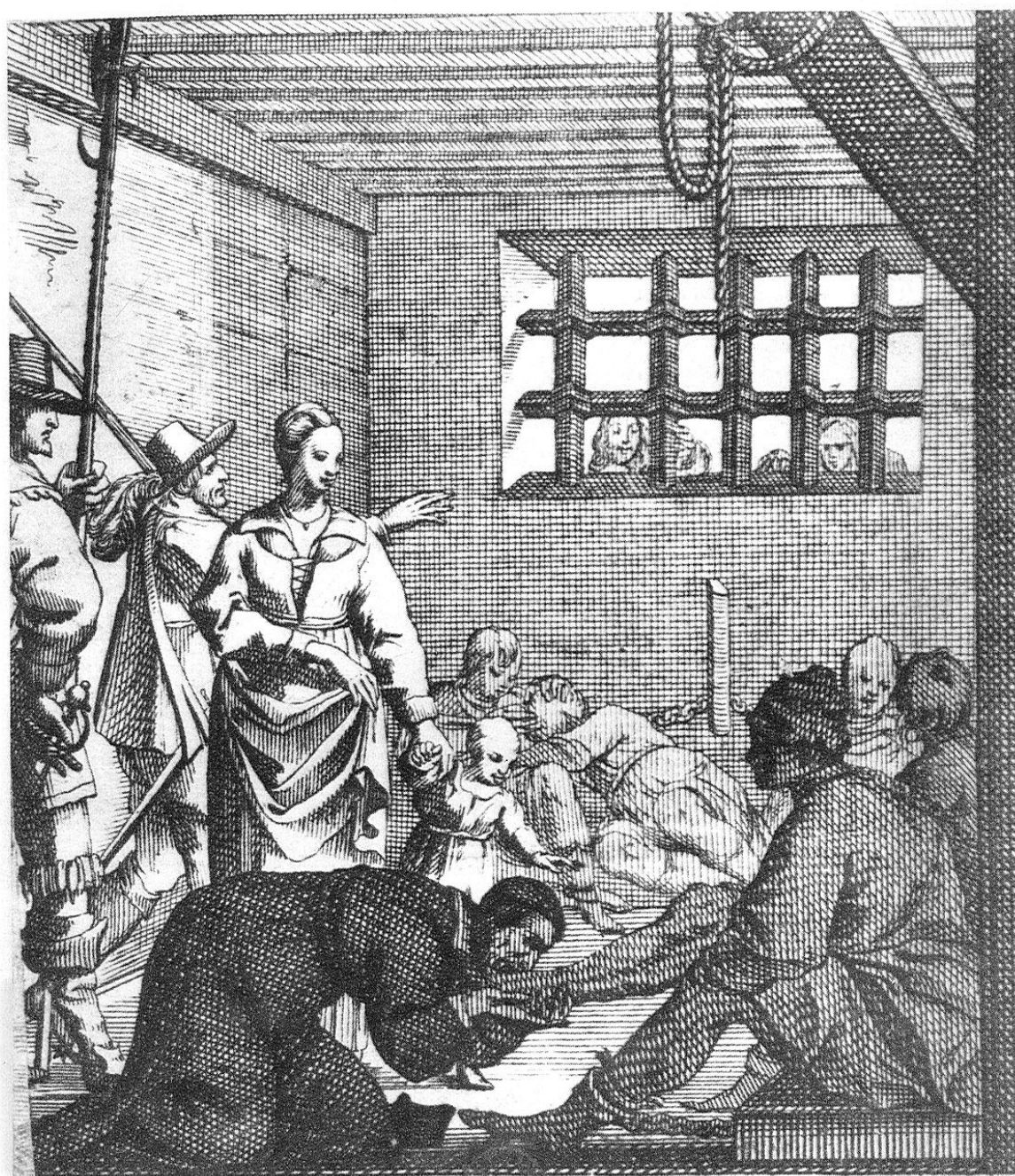


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